



Counterinsurgency in Afghanistan Lessons Learned by a Brigade Combat Team

Colonel John M. Spiszer, U.S. Army

THIS ARTICLE DISCUSSES some important lessons for brigade combat teams (BCTs) in the Afghanistan fight and those preparing to go. It is based on my observations and actions during leader reconnaissance, training, and the execution of COIN in the Nangarhar, Nuristan, Konar, and Laghman (N2KL) provinces from December 2007 to July 2009 by Task Force Duke, the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, which I had the privilege of commanding.

Hope and Faith

We in the military, and maybe even those in the press and civilians who analyze our COIN efforts, define the decisive effort in counterinsurgency as winning hearts and minds. However, based on my experiences, I would argue that this is an improper mind-set around which to base operations. As a goal or end state, winning hearts and minds provides the wrong focus for operations for a variety of reasons.

First, this focus lays on a requirement to win the hearts and minds of the Afghan people. This is the wrong approach. Our ultimate goal is to leave Afghanistan. We must maintain good enough relations with the people, the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF), and the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan, but we don't have to win hearts and minds; we have to leave and turn the effort over to the Afghans. The Afghans have to win the hearts and minds.

From the standpoint of a foreign force aiding the Afghans in their internal fight against the Taliban and other threats, it is better for us to focus on hope and faith. The Afghan people need to have hope that their future is going to be better. This at least gets most of them on the fence and lessens support for the insurgents. We do this ably now by our current efforts in population security. They allow development to proceed. The people, for the most part, do not support the insurgency—life is better than it ever has been. Security is acceptable, and roads, clinics, schools, micro-commerce, and job opportunities have all developed. In these areas, the insurgency has to fight using asymmetric methods and is easier to target and interdict.

Colonel John M. Spiszer is the commander of the Joint Multinational Readiness Center in Hohenfels, Germany, and the former commander of the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division. He received a B.S. from the U.S. Military Academy, an M.S.A. from Central Michigan University, and an MMAS from the U.S. Army School of Advanced Military Studies at Fort Leavenworth, KS. He has written numerous articles for Military Review (including a DePuy Award winner).

PHOTO: The author discussing the closure of a combat outpost and subsequent relocation of U.S. and ANSF forces with the commander and G3 of 201st ANA Corps, northern Konar Province, September 2008. (Photo courtesy of author)

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CPT Trevor Voelkel, C Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment commander, with an Afghan local leader in Kandahar Province, September 2008.

However, the harder piece is giving the people faith that they are going to get a better future, that things will continue to improve, that we, the United States, will not leave prematurely again (as we arguably did in 1989 when we stopped supporting the mujahedeen) and the situation will not revert to the chaos of the 1990s. The people must have faith that the ANSF and government are going to be there when the coalition leaves, that the conditions that have begun to improve will continue to improve, and that their lives will be better.¹ This is the hard piece of the effort in a country that has little tradition of government beyond the major cities and where strife and chaos have existed for the past 30 years. Corruption, the drug trade, warlordism, and cross-border issues add to the problem, but for the Afghan people to support the government instead of the Taliban and other insurgent elements, the people must have faith that the government will at least give them the future they see in other parts of Afghanistan. If we shape our operations to give the people

hope—population security, good developmental projects—and faith that their government is going to pick up the ball in the future when we do leave, then we are aiming in a better direction than just winning their hearts and minds.

Notice that unlike a focus on hearts and minds, the hope and faith effort focuses on what the center of gravity, the people, feel about their future and their government. The focus is on the people's relationship to government, not the international force. Hope and faith lead directly to better key tasks and end states for units and are the basis for a better "mission narrative" to describe and direct our operations.²

ANSF Development

The hardest part is developing the capacity of Afghan institutions to stand on their own, carry on the fight, and deliver the essential services expected of a government. While there are some limitations, capabilities exist to accomplish this at the BCT level and others.

However, up until recently few units had a separate and dedicated focus in this area. Most had a governmental development line of operation or effort as part of their campaign plan, but usually lumped ANSF development into a security or combat operations line of effort. The focus was on executing operations to defeat the enemy or protect the populace, not on developing the ANSF to provide security on its own. While they must remain a major line of effort, operations to defeat the enemy or protect the populace are only the first step in giving the people hope.

Too often, ANSF development has been an afterthought, a byproduct, or the responsibility of the Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan (CSTC-A) or the new NATO Training Mission-Afghanistan (NTM-A). For the Afghan people to achieve the faith in the government needed for us to ultimately depart, the coalition must make a concerted effort to build capacity. They must do so with BCTs not just assisting this effort but taking the lead. They must have a detailed, integrated, resourced, and focused development plan, one that goes beyond partnering with ANSF to improving the abilities of the Afghan Uniformed Police (AUP), the Border Police (ABP), the National Army (ANA), and ancillary organizations and operational coordination centers at every level. With guidance, direction, and some of the resources provided by CSTC-A, and now NTM-A, it is up to the BCTs to put this development effort into operation and make it happen. Without this level of integration and focus, we will not facilitate an Afghan ability to provide security.

The BCTs should have separate working groups and targeting efforts related to their partner ANSF units and their development. They have to be innovative in how they train the AUP, ABP, and ANA in their areas of operation. The 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team's ANP immersion training program (begun in 2007 and operating in N2KL through 2009) is one good example. Another was

the CJTF-101 ABP Focused Border Development program in 2008 and 2009.

For units busy clearing and holding a contested area, this new effort will be a challenge. However, if we don't spend the time to get the Afghans capable of doing the job themselves, they won't be able to accomplish their mission when we do leave. Years of effort and sacrifice will have been to no avail. The BCT can truly make a difference in the development of the ANSF.

Restraint

Every soldier must understand the concept of restraint; it is the key task that we must train to ensure the legitimacy of our efforts in the eyes of the Afghans, our Nation, and the world. Aside from being the right thing to do, restraint is essential to prevent making additional enemies in a revenge-oriented society.

Surprisingly, however, the word "restraint" is used only three times in FM 3-24, although emerging ISAF guidance related to escalation of force refers to the necessity of "courageous restraint" in its application.³ This is exactly what we are after. We must have soldiers and units who practice courageous restraint in their dealings with the people. We have to do everything we can to protect the people in Afghanistan, to limit civilian casualties, and increase the people's ability to have hope for their future and faith in their government. Conducting operations with appropriate restraint is crucial to success.

We are asking a tremendous amount from our young soldiers in a dangerous combat environment. We are asking them to accept additional risk in how they operate. Still, while it is not easy, it is not impossible. Building a team of soldiers who practice disciplined initiative and empowering them to do the right thing, at the right time, for the right reason without having to tell them to do it is the cornerstone of a good strategy. To do this, we must train our soldiers well. They must know their own weapons and capabilities perfectly so that they feel

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confident in taking the extra time needed to identify threats properly, knowing that they can still respond accurately, immediately, and lethally if the situation dictates. They must intimately understand their rules of engagement and be masters of escalation of force techniques and equipment in order to protect innocent civilians. They must be intimately familiar with the operational environment and its threats and patterns.

We are asking a lot from soldiers, but the complex battlefield requires it. If we want to win this fight, this level of competence is a requirement, not an option. Our soldiers must practice restraint in how we employ force, how we drive, how we treat people—in every aspect of our operations. Restraint must become our primary individual skill if we hope to prevail in Afghanistan. Without it, we will undermine our efforts in the country and internationally. We are the good people in this fight—we have to act that way every day.

Unity of Effort

While restraint is our key individual skill, developing and maintaining unity of effort is the key leader skill required in Afghanistan.⁴ Commanders and their staffs, especially at the BCT level, will

be dealing with a bewildering and varied cast of characters that no training can replicate. The list is long and confusing, including ANA, ANCOP, AUP, ABP, OCC-Ps, OCC-Rs, NDS, MOI, MOD, MOF, MAIL, PRTs, DSTs, ADTs, SCRS, DOS, USAID, USDA, UNAMA, ICRC, a host of NGOs, numerous SOF elements, RC HQs, IJC, NTM-A, CSTC-A, ISAF, BMTF, and more. I won't even try to define these things, which represent just the tip of an iceberg. There are a lot of players in the environment. Understanding them, visualizing what they bring to the fight, communicating to them what you are trying to do (and would like them to do), and directing your own actions in conjunction with (or at least not in competition with) them while trying to direct or influence their operations, is one heck of a battle command challenge.

However, the BCT that can work effectively with all entities above, parallel to, and below its level and leverage all available resources will do a much better job in providing hope to the people and faith in the government. Doing so requires an open mind, an ability and willingness to compromise, and some good background knowledge, including an understanding of the different organizations and their priorities and goals.



Courtesy of Author

B Company, 1st Battalion, 26th Infantry Regiment soldiers in one of many firefights in the Korengal Valley, Konar Province, November 2008.

The staff and subordinate units have to understand why unity of effort is important, the potential stakes involved, and the end state. One careless unit leader who doesn't understand the importance of the UN can unintentionally ruin relationships for an entire tour through rudeness, arrogance, or lack of attention to detail.

We initially called unity of effort *unity of purpose*—ensuring that all the varied organizations would all row in the same direction, preferably the direction we wanted. What we didn't know as we went into it was that unity of purpose already existed. Virtually everyone wanted the same thing—a peaceful, stable, and viable Afghanistan. However, our ways of getting there were frequently different. Convincing one's own organization that any assistance is valuable and important is critical. There are many people and organizations trying to do good in Afghanistan. We are all in this together. Taking the common purpose and focusing it into a concerted effort makes a huge difference.

For example, working to convince all the agencies in Nangarhar that our focus should be on the District of Khogyani paid important dividends. We focused most of the efforts and resources available throughout the province on an “at risk” district with a traditional infiltration route to Pakistan. It had a previous Al-Qaeda presence, an influential tribe, and an enduring ANSF and coalition presence. We were able to work with other organizations in economy of force operations. Critical to gaining headway were good relations with our Afghan partners, civilian counterparts, UN organizations, nongovernmental organizations, Special Operations Forces, and others. We were able to make a greater difference in Nangarhar because we created unity of effort among virtually all organizations operating there.

Continuity

Related to unity of effort was our focus on continuity. We were extremely fortunate to assume responsibility of the N2KL area from the 173rd Airborne Brigade Combat Team that replaced the 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division. Upon transfer of authority in July 2008, we were the beneficiaries of an operational environment that had a consistent focus for the preceding two years. We recognized early on during our leader

reconnaissance and preparation for deployment that our predecessors were on track. They understood COIN doctrine and how to apply it in Afghanistan, and they were making progress in large parts of the region.⁵ Moreover, we felt that the best thing to do was to stay the course and follow the path of some very smart people and units who had gone before us.

Maintaining continuity is extremely important, and while it may not be applicable or possible in all cases, we should seriously consider it so. We picked up where our predecessors left off and focused on getting our ten yards, the next first down, from the preceding series of plays. Rather than spending a large amount of time reviewing and rewriting our predecessors' campaign plan, we adopted it, attempted to improve it at the margins, and moved out immediately. While this may imply a certain lack of intellectual drive, it reassured the Afghans and other organizations and it compelled us to get things done. In short, we adopted an existing 80 percent solution from our predecessors rather than spend all of our time coming up with a 100 percent solution that we then wouldn't be able to execute.

Overall, the continuity of operations from one BCT to the next was highly beneficial. We focused on—

- Where and when to conduct operations to separate the enemy from the population.
- Development of the ANSF.
- Using Commanders Emergency Relief Program funds to jump-start the economy, facilitate security efforts, provide jobs, and build roads and schools.
- Partnering with and developing local Afghan governments.

All this led to accumulated gains that were starting to be felt, especially along the rivers where roads and bridges that had taken years to plan, fund, and execute finally came to completion.

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Artillerymen fire in support of troops in the Korengal Valley, Konar Province, November 2008.

The sustained and continued efforts in Nangarhar, Laghman, and the Konar River Valley helped create stability and progress in an area containing well over three million people (over 10 percent of the population of Afghanistan).

Battlefield Circulation

Battle command is the key element that ties all of a unit's efforts together. The ability to execute battle command—to understand, visualize, describe, direct, and assess—is critical to a unit conducting any operation, let alone a complex COIN fight in the most challenging terrain in the world. Effective, frequent, and focused battlefield circulation was the key to exercising all aspects of battle command for me. Owing to the nature of the N2KL terrain, I did this with my command sergeant major, the BCT S3, and very few others, mostly by helicopter.⁶

The nature of the fight, terrain, and friendly disposition demanded a high degree of decentralized execution of operations, which commanders at all levels can only influence to a small degree. This required extensive efforts to ensure synchronization across the force prior to execution. Our battlefield

circulation played a key role in this across the command. In fact, it was essential because our movements were often the only way that company and battalion commanders and ANSF partner unit commanders got to some of their own subordinate units. Battlefield circulation was essential to being able to get out and understand what was going on at the remote outposts and across the BCT's area. We had discussions with the soldiers and their leaders; checked on the quality of life, living conditions, and defenses of many remote combat outposts and forward operating bases; and checked on the morale, fighting spirit, and readiness of the force.

Battlefield circulation allowed me to reinforce key elements of my commander's intent and vision, see what we had coming up next, and see why hope and faith, ANSF development, restraint, unity of effort, and continuity were important for all of our soldiers, even those in the most remote location. Battlefield circulation allowed me to review and discuss upcoming operations and ensure that we were properly prepared with enough detailed planning and allocation of resources to ensure mission success. We were able to adhere

to ISAF guidelines and tactics, techniques, and procedures, while also protecting our soldiers in the execution of their mission.

The nature of the terrain, the size of BCT operational environments, and the decentralized aspects of the counterinsurgency fight make it of the utmost importance to do battlefield circulation. Battlefield circulation requires focus, planning, and preparation. It is an operation in itself each time it is conducted.

Crucial Lessons

Counterinsurgency operations in Afghanistan are different from those in Iraq. In fact, they are even different from one Afghan province to another. Nevertheless, Army doctrine provides an excellent baseline for operations. Task Force Duke used

doctrine, the lessons of prior units, guidance from Regional Command-East and ISAF, and a dose of common sense to get its ten yards in N2KL by the summer of 2009.

We learned that the following are crucial:

- A good understanding of COIN.
- A focus on the populace in the context of hope and faith instead of hearts and minds.
- ANSF development.
- Soldier restraint.
- Leader focus on unity of effort.
- Continuity with previous good units.
- Continuous, planned battlefield circulation.

Task Force Duke had 39 of its personnel pay the ultimate sacrifice during our operations there. Over 280 received the Purple Heart, and over 300 received medals for valor. We owe it to them to get it right. **MR**

NOTES

1. Faith is inherently related to what is described as the main objective in our capstone doctrinal manual on COIN—legitimacy. U.S. Army Field Manual (FM) 3-24, *Counterinsurgency* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office [GPO], December 2006), 1-21.

2. Mission narratives are discussed in depth in our emerging doctrine concerning design. See Jack D. Kern, *Design Tools of the Trade* (Fort Leavenworth, KS: U.S. Army Command and General Staff College), chap. 7. In addition, they are defined for the first time in FM 5-0, *The Operations Process* (Washington, DC: GPO, March 2010), 3-12. I could encapsulate our mission narrative by saying that our operations must be designed and executed such that the Afghan people have hope for their future and faith in their government to give that future to them.

3. "Courageous restraint" is introduced as a concept on page 7 of the draft *ISAF Standard Operating Procedures 373, Direction and Guidance for Escalation of Force*, 18 February 2010.

4. In getting the organization all on the same sheet of music, three documents were critical. First, the Commander's Intent—what we wanted to accomplish—was the crucial piece that guided all actions. Second, the Vision for the organization—what we wanted to be—was important to ensure the culture of the organization supported our overall COIN efforts. Finally, I presented the Leader's Tactical Synchronization briefing to all patrol leaders and above to ensure they understood Afghanistan, COIN in Afghanistan, the commander's intent, and vision for the organization. These were key to developing unity of effort in an organization that included some 6,000 U.S. soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, and civilians, with about half rotated out during the year.

5. COL William B. Ostlund, "Tactical Leader Lessons Learned in Afghanistan: Operation Enduring Freedom VII," *Military Review* (July-August 2009), 2-9.

6. The key individuals who went virtually everywhere with me included CSM Ron Orosz, the BCT CSM; MAJ Jon Beasley, the BCT S3; and SSG Ernie Baylor, security, RTO, note taker, and do-it-all guy. These three can take the credit for many of the successes the BCT experienced in Afghanistan. They made a difference.